



Talking Points: Health Effects of Volcanic Ash

September 30, 2004

- We understand that people may be concerned about possible health risks of volcanic ash, due to predictions of an imminent eruption at Mount St. Helens in southwestern Washington.

Ash in the air:

- Although volcanic ash is not poisonous, it can be dangerous for people with young or compromised lungs or people with heart problems.
 - For example, infants, the elderly, and people with respiratory conditions such as asthma, emphysema and other chronic lung diseases may experience respiratory problems.
 - People who take medications for existing lung or heart conditions should make sure they have an adequate supply of medications.
- Take precautions to protect your lungs if volcanic ash is present; this is especially important for those who have respiratory conditions such as asthma, emphysema, and other chronic lung diseases.
 - Stay inside, if possible.
 - Keep windows and doors closed.
 - Persons with respiratory conditions may decrease exposure to ash by wearing an effective single-use (disposable) face mask when outside.
 - Replace disposable furnace filters or clean permanent furnace filters frequently.
- Volcanic ash is different from ordinary house dust because it contains material that can scratch surfaces when it is brushed off; small ash particles may also scratch eyes in windy conditions.

Ash in drinking water:

- Studies from earlier eruptions of Mount St. Helens have found no significant health problems that would affect drinking water. It would be unusual for ash from an eruption to contaminate your water supply.
- If there is ash in your drinking water, we recommend that you use an alternative source of drinking water, such as purchased bottled water, until the water can be tested.
- If possible, wait a day or two after an eruption to clean up around your home, property and vehicles. Too many people using lots of water at the same time could cause a strain on your water system.
- We are working with water utilities in the area to assure that they have plans to keep their systems operating properly and effectively if water sources are inundated with ash.

For updated information:

- **[Washington State Emergency Management Division](http://www.emd.wa.gov/)**: <http://www.emd.wa.gov/>
- **[United States Geological Survey Volcano Observatory](http://vulcan.wr.usgs.gov/Volcanoes/Cascades/CurrentActivity/current_updates.html)**: http://vulcan.wr.usgs.gov/Volcanoes/Cascades/CurrentActivity/current_updates.html